The Hero’s Journey Within The Hobbit By J. R. R. Tolkien

The Hobbit in and of itself was an accident. In a letter J.R.R. Tolkien wrote to W.H. Auden, he stated that,

It was unhappily really meant, as far as I was conscious, as a 'children's story', and as I had not learned since then, and my children were not quite old enough to correct me, it has some of the sillinesses of manner caught unthinkingly from the kind of stuff I had served to me, as Chaucer may catch a minstrel tag. I deeply regret them. So do intelligent children. (Tolkien)

Although Tolkien originally shared the story of Bilbo and his journey alongside the dwarves with his children, it would later come to sell over 100 million copies worldwide. This paper will demonstrate that The Hobbit is a variant of Joseph Campbell’s hero’s journey, and arguably is the reason why it is so popular.

A crucial aspect of the hero’s journey is the call to adventure. The adventure arguably begins when the call to adventure occurs. The hero can refuse the call, but the hero may suffer as a result. The call to adventure ultimately disrupts the tranquility of the hero’s ordinary world. Tolkien formulates the call to adventure in a unique aspect. In The Hobbit, Bilbo is faced with his call to adventure right outside of his door. Gandalf greets Bilbo and insists that Bilbo go along on the adventure. Bilbo asks for Gandalf’s pardon, and in response, Gandalf adds “I will go so far as to send you on this adventure. Very amusing for me, very good for you – and profitable too, very likely, if you ever get over it” (Tolkien 7). Hobbits are known for being non-adventurous, as stated in the book, “People considered them very respectable, not only because most of them were rich, but also because they never had any adventures or did anything unexpected” (Tolkien 2). This tells us that the Baggins family had never gone on any adventures. The morning after the next, after Gandalf and the dwarves had left, Bilbo thinks to himself “Thinking of dragons and all that outlandish nonsense at your age!” (Tolkien 27). This shows us that Bilbo was interested in the idea but ultimately refused in the initial call to adventure. He sees adventures as nonsense, and thus did not wake up with the dwarves to start the adventure. Of course, like any story, the mentor rather pushes the hero to go on the adventure. Gandalf influenced Bilbo to meet up with the dwarves and keep them company throughout the adventure.

Another crucial aspect of the hero’s journey is a talisman. A talisman is a special item that has a significant role in the ordeal, the main fight. When lost in the caverns beneath the Misty Mountains, Bilbo comes across a ring. We don’t find out the significance of said ring until we meet a creature named Gollum. Bilbo and Gollum exchange riddles and because of Bilbo’s last-minute riddle asking what he has in his pockets, Gollum loses his temper and attempts to go after Bilbo.

Bilbo almost stopped breathing and went stiff himself. He was desperate.

He must get away, out of this horrible darkness, while he had any strength left. He must fight. He must stab the foul thing, put its eyes out, kill it. It meant to kill him. No, not a fair fight. He was invisible now. Gollum had no sword. Gollum had not actually threatened to kill him or tried

to yet. (Tolkien 79).

Bilbo slips on the ring, and thus we see the significance of the ring. Gollum passes by Bilbo and acts as if he didn't know Bilbo was there. As stated in the book, "It was a ring of power, and if you slipped that ring on your finger, you were invisible; only in the full sunlight could you be seen, and then only by your shadow, and that would be shaky and faint" (Tolkien 76). Diving deep into the importance of a talisman, they typically show a universal theme of greed. Gollum lives beneath the misty mountains with his "precious" ring. He is overwhelmed when he cannot find it. Bilbo, by contrast, isn't interested in the ring. Or seen earlier in the story, treasure in general.

A character archetype present in the hero's journey and The Hobbit is the shapeshifter. The shapeshifter in this story is Beorn. Earlier in Bilbo's journey, we're introduced to Beorn as "A huge man with a thick black beard and hair, and great bare arms and legs with knotted muscles." (Tolkien 110). He provided Bilbo and the Dwarves with much-needed food and lodging. Later on, during the battle of five armies, when all hope seemed lost. Beorn appeared again, but this time, like a bear. "In that last hour Beorn himself had appeared – no one knew how or from where. He came alone, and in bear's shape; and he seemed to have grown almost to giant-size in his wrath." (Tolkien 264). We can assume that Tolkien named Beorn while being influenced by Old Norse as Björn is an Old Norse word meaning "bear".

In conclusion, Tolkien relied on Joseph Campbell's template of the monomyth when creating The Hobbit. The hero's journey, usage of talismans, and the portrayal of various character archetypes can arguably be the reason why The Hobbit is so popular. Roping in the call to adventure, being rather unexpected is a unique twist. Most heroes have some background information into the adventure they are about to embark on, but Bilbo was rather left in the dust. He was a hobbit. And Hobbits don't do unexpected things. The ring is a talisman and helping Bilbo on more than one occasion, shows that the ring isn't an ordinary talisman. It also symbolizes a message portrayed in the hobbit where creatures and men alike are run by greed. Bilbo not being affected by the ring or the money adds depth behind him. Finally, using the shapeshifter archetype, Tolkien cleverly foreshadowed Beorn shifting into a bear, when he described him early on in the book. With his bare arms, one might tip their hat to the clever usage of foreshadowing. All in all, Tolkien's success with The Hobbit is something one can ultimately thank Joseph Campbell for.

Works Cited

1. Tolkien, J.R.R. 'Letter 163 to W.H. Auden (1955).' Tolkien Estate. 2015. .
2. Tolkien, J.R.R. The Hobbit. George & Allen Unwin, 1937.